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Iran's 'moderate' leader could be master of deceit

By Martin Sieff
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Statements last week by the Iranian leader tagged as a "moderate" by some top Washington analysts suggest the Iranians have been successfully feeding false intelligence assessments to the United States.

Speaker of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani told a group of senior military commanders in Tehran Thursday that Iran had pitted the Democrats and Republicans against each other so that "they were now cutting each other's throats."

Mr. Rafsanjani said that the United States and Britain had sowed discord in other nations for 200 years and "now we are paying the U.S. back in its own coin."

His comments raise the possibility that Iran has been manipulating its U.S. connections to discredit the Reagan administration.

Mr. Rafsanjani was the man who publicly broke the news of the secret arms deal on Nov. 4, and U.S. analysts have previously assumed Mr. Rafsanjani did so to "guard his back" from other factions in the Iranian leadership who were critical of the links. But his confident and unapologetic words suggest the Iranian leader may be telling the truth.

CIA Director William Casey reportedly has said that until last year, the United States had virtually no intelligence information coming out of Iran. But, he has said, over the past year — the period of the clandestine arms supplies — sources there have been excellent.

However, Mr. Casey's optimistic assessment apparently ignores miscalculations that have bedeviled Washington's policy toward Iran.

The U.S. intelligence community predicted an Iranian offensive against Iraq in the Gulf War would

come last October or November. It did not.

Likewise, Pentagon and CIA analysts have consistently predicted that when the eventual Iranian attack came, it would be unsuccessful. However, their confidence in this prediction is puzzling in the light of an enormous Iranian arms buildup. That buildup has come primarily from China, but also — as has now emerged — from the U.S.-Israeli connection.

The Iranian leadership also has not modified its goals of an all-out victory in the six-year war with Iraq and toppling Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Since none of these external factors can account for the U.S. intelligence assessment, it appears to be based on some "inside source."

Such an assessment would also have encouraged American approval for the arms deal. Since U.S. planners would have assumed that Iran's offensive could not succeed anyway, they would have seen little risk in sending the weapons.

On another point, the fundamental rationale used to defend former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane's ill-fated visits to Tehran was that he was to make contact with highly placed potential moderates in the Iranian leadership.

But in the four days Mr. McFarlane was in Tehran last May, he appears to have been given a humiliating runaround by low-level Iranian officials. The highly touted "top-level connections" did not materialize. And on Nov. 19, the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, gloatingly referred to Mr. McFarlane's humiliation in Tehran.

Mr. Rafsanjani appears to have been targeted by Mr. McFarlane and his successor, Vice Adm. John Poindexter, who resigned last week, as the leading moderate in the Iranian government. But, once again, such an assessment could not be based on the public record.

Mr. Rafsanjani is the leading patron of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Tehran leadership. He is a favorite of the ayatollah, particularly for his determination to pursue the war against Iraq to a victorious conclusion.

Mr. Rafsanjani has proved a tireless organizer of arms supply connections — a role that would have led him to favor the U.S. arms shipments, but not for any motives of moderation. He has also repeatedly threatened the moderate Gulf oil sheikhdoms to toe the Iranian line.

Significantly, the revelations of the U.S.-Iran connection do not seem to have hurt his standing in Tehran in any significant way.

The U.S. connection to Iran was motivated by fears that the Islamic Republic would splinter after the death of the 86-year-old ayatollah. This view is now widespread in official Washington, but it appears to underestimate the Iranian regime's popular appeal and to overestimate the significance of external opposition to it.

Also, U.S. fear of Soviet penetration in the region allows the Iranians to manipulate the United States.

The first planeload of arms covertly flown into Iran in 1985 was intended for the Iranian army. However, when the aircraft landed, it was surrounded by forces of the Revolutionary Guards, who appropriated the weapons for their own use.

Iranian arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar played a central role in the U.S.-Iran connection. According to several sources, Mr. Ghorbanifar

had worked for Israeli intelligence in the days of the shah. After Ayatollah Khomeini took over, Mr. Ghorbanifar was involved in a coup plot against the new regime, they said. He was abroad at the time and escaped being executed, but several of his relatives had been seized, and he was then "turned" to work on behalf of the regime, sources said.

The significance of this connection is that when Mr. McFarlane and his associates thought they were dealing with a "moderate" Iranian faction, if indeed they believed this, they were in fact dealing with the Iranian government.

An inescapable conclusion is that the United States was better off with no sources in Iran than with the so-called "excellent" information sources that were developed during the past 18 months, when the arms were being shipped.

It may be significant that the new Iranian sources opened up only after the Beirut kidnapping of the CIA's chief Middle East analyst, William Buckley, by pro-Iranian Islamic terrorists on March 16, 1984.

According to an April 1985 report in the London-based Shi'ite Moslem

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newsletter Al Taqdir. Mr. Buckley was flown to Iran within a week of his capture.

He was held near the holy city of Qom, the newsletter said, and was subjected to repeated torture until he "cracked" under the strain.

Islamic Jihad, the pro-Iranian group that claimed responsibility for kidnapping Mr. Buckley and several other Americans in Beirut, claimed it "executed" Mr. Buckley on Oct. 14, 1985, in retaliation for an Israeli attack on the Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunisia a week earlier. It released an out-of-focus photograph of what it

claimed was Mr. Buckley's body, but his body has never been found.

Sources close to the hostage crisis say Mr. Buckley, who was 56 when he was kidnapped, is believed to have died in May or June 1985 of pneumonia and other complications brought on by torture and a lack of medical attention.

If Mr. Buckley was sent to Iran, as the newsletter claimed, Iran's Revolutionary Guards and their patron, Mr. Rafsanjani, would undoubtedly have had a major role in the operation, analysts say.

Mr. Buckley would have had no hope of surviving, one analyst said, because his captors would not have permitted the CIA any chance to debrief him and carry out a damage assessment on what he had revealed.

Mr. Buckley's knowledge of the working of CIA Middle East operations was exhaustive. Armed with his information, the Iranian intelligence officials would have been in a position to feed the CIA misleading information in a credible way, the analyst said.

The CIA also may have been crippled in its ability to assess new Iranian information sources because of casualties the agency suffered in the April 17, 1983, bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. Seventeen Americans died, including Robert Ames, the CIA's chief Middle East analyst, and six other leading CIA Middle East specialists.

Strategic disinformation is not a novel concept to the leaders of the Iranian revolution. The Shi'ite concept of "khod'ah" involves tricking an adversary by appearing to cooperate with him.

The record of U.S. intelligence on Iran suggests Ayatollah Khomeini and Mr. Rafsanjani have learned that lesson well.